

# The Tao of Islam

by Sachiko Murata



Chinese cosmology describes the whole universe in terms of *yin* and *yang*, which can be understood as the creative and receptive or male and female principles of existence. Nothing escapes this relationship. The famous symbol of Tai Chi, the 'Great Ultimate' or the *Tao*, portrays *yin* and *yang* as constant movement and change. *Yin* carries within itself potential *yang* and *yang* carries within itself potential *yin*. When *yin* and *yang* move and reach the 'old' or 'pure' state, potential *yin* and *yang* are actualized: *yin* becomes *yang*, and *yang* becomes *yin*. 'Change' or *i* is the process whereby heaven and earth and everything between them are created and re-created. When the sun rises, the moon disappears. When spring comes, winter goes. *Yin* and *yang* are the principles of change and the symbols of creation. In the words of Confucius: "Like a running river, the whole universe is flowing ceaselessly day and night." Existence means harmonious change on the basis of the *Tao*. If harmony between *yin* and *yang* were to be lost, the universe would cease to flow and nothing could exist.

Most students of religion are familiar with these basic concepts of Chinese cosmology. Given the popularity of the *I Ching* and the omnipresence of the *yin/yang* symbol, no one needs to be told that Chinese thought is concerned with harmony, equilibrium and balance between two

principles of existence. In contrast, Islamic cosmology is practically unknown in the West. What I would like to do in this essay is to try to draw a picture of the Islamic cosmos as it has generally been perceived by Muslims. In order to do this I will seek help from some of the great theoreticians of Islamic cosmology, such as the thirteenth-century thinkers Ebno'l-'Arabi, Najmo'd-Din Rāzi and 'Azizo'd-Din Nasafi. Characteristically, such authorities based most of what they say upon the description of the cosmos provided by the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet. What is perhaps unusual in my approach is that I will be looking at Islam from the point of view of Chinese thought, as set down primarily in the *I Ching*.

Islamic cosmology is based firmly on a bipolar view of reality. If we call the two poles, '*yin* and *yang*', we will not be far from the mark, as I hope to show in what follows. But Islamic cosmology, like everything else Islamic, is based upon a special view of God. Thus, we have to look for the roots of Islamic cosmology in theological concepts. Just as *yin* and *yang* are found within Tai Chi itself, so are the two poles of the Islamic cosmos prefigured in the Divine Reality, or rather, in the relationship between God and the cosmos.

In Islamic terms, the 'cosmos' (*al-'ālam*) is defined as 'everything other than God', so the term has no spatial or temporal limitations. The relation-

ship of God to everything other than God is described from two basic points of view. In one respect, God is infinitely beyond the cosmos. Here, the theological term is *tanzih*, which means 'to declare God incomparable' with everything that exists. In this respect God is completely inaccessible to His creatures and beyond their understanding. This point of view is the classical position of '*Kalām*' ('Islamic dogmatic theology'). Many verses could be cited to show how the Koran takes this point of view, such as "Glory be to God, the Lord of Inaccessibility, above everything that they describe" (37:180) or, in simpler terms, "Nothing is like Him" (42:11). In this respect, God is an impersonal reality far beyond human concerns. He is the God of negative theology.

Though the proponents of *Kalām* emphasized the perspective of incomparability and transcendence, they represented only a small number of intellectuals who had relatively little influence on the Muslim masses. There is also a second point of view which is clearly supported by many Koranic verses and which is stressed in popular Islam and the spiritual tradition. The God of the theologians, as Ebno'l-'Arabi remarked, was a God whom no one could possibly love, since He was too remote and incomprehensible (Ebno'l-'Arabi n.d., Vol. II. p. 326, line 13). But the God of the Koran, the Prophet, and the spiritual authorities of Islam is a God

who is supremely lovable, since He is dominated by concern for His creatures. As the Koran puts it, "He loves them, and they love Him" (5:54). God's love for creation produces in the creatures love for God. This God of compassion and love can be grasped and understood. To use the theological term, He must be 'declared similar' (*tashbih*) in some mysterious fashion to His creation. We can rightly conceive of Him in human attributes. This is the point of view of God's immanence in all things, and it is clearly supported by such Koranic verses as "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115) and "We are nearer to man than the jugular vein" (50:16). In this respect, God is a personal God.

These two basic theological perspectives form two poles between which Islamic thought takes shape. The most sophisticated of the Muslim thinkers strike a delicate balance between the two positions. Negative and positive theology both play a role in the understanding of the Divine Reality. One can gain a certain grasp of the role these two perspectives have played in Islam by comparing them with the situation found in the Chinese tradition, where the Confucianists place emphasis upon *yang* and the Taoists upon *yin*. In other words, if asked whether the *Tao* itself is *yin* or *yang*, a Confucianist would more probably answer that the *Tao* itself is *yang*, while a Taoist would be more likely to say that it is *yin*. In the same way, the experts in jurisprudence and *Kalām* – that is, those Muslim authorities who defend the outward and legalistic teachings of Islam – lay stress upon God's transcendence. They insist that He is a wrathful God and they constantly warn about hell and the divine punishment. These are the Muslim 'Confucianists', who see God primarily as *yang*. In contrast, those authorities who are concerned with Islam's spiritual dimension constantly remind the first group of the prophetic saying, "God's mercy precedes His wrath." They

maintain that mercy, love and gentleness are the overriding reality of existence, and that these will win out in the end. In their view, God is primarily *yin*.

Islamic theological thinking revolves around the divine names revealed in the Koran, the so-called 'ninety-nine names or attributes of God'. Each of the two basic theological perspectives, transcendence and immanence, emphasizes certain names or attributes of God. When God is conceived of as transcendent, He is called by such names as Mighty, Inaccessible, Great, Majestic, Compeller, Creator, Proud, All-high, King, Wrathful, Avenger, Slayer, Depriver and Harmer. The tradition calls these the Names of Majesty or the Names of Severity. In the present context, I would call them '*yang* names', since they place stress upon greatness, power, control and masculinity. When God is understood in terms of similarity and immanence, He is called by names such as Beautiful, Near, Merciful, Compassionate, Loving, Gentle, Forgiving, Pardonner, Life-giver, Enricher and Bestower. These are known as the 'Names of Beauty' or 'Gentleness'. They are '*yin* names', since they place stress on submission to the wishes of others, softness, acceptance and receptivity.

All these names and many more like them are mentioned in the Koran. In the view of the Muslim cosmologists, these two categories of names work in harmony to bring the cosmos into existence. As Rumi puts it, referring to the two kinds of names by their dominant attribute, "Severity and gentleness were married, and a world of good and evil was born from the two" (Rumi 1925-40, II 2680, quoted in Chittick, 1983, p. 101).

Many theologians see a reference to the two kinds of divine names in the Koranic expression, 'the two hands of God'. They take this as a symbol for the complementarity of *yin* and *yang*. The Koran says that only human beings among all creatures were created with both hands of

God (38:76). This is read as an allusion to the fact that, as the Prophet said, man was created in God's own image. Hence, human beings had to manifest all the names of God, both the names of severity and the names of gentleness. In contrast, the angels of mercy were created with only God's right hand, while the satans were created with only His left hand. Everything other than human beings represents an imperfect image of the Divine Reality; so it is dominated by one hand or the other. Only humans were created through a perfect balance and equilibrium of both kinds of attributes.

The Koran repeatedly affirms that all things are signs of God, which is to say that everything gives news of God's nature and reality. As a result, many Muslim thinkers, the cosmologists in particular, see everything in the universe as a reflection of the divine names and attributes. In a famous saying, the Prophet explained why God created the universe: "God says, 'I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known. Therefore I created the creatures, so that I might be known.'" Hence, the universe is the locus in which the Hidden Treasure is known by the creatures. Through the universe God comes to be known, and since there is nothing in the universe but created things, it is the created things themselves which give news of the Hidden Treasure. The cosmologists employ the terms *zohur* or 'manifestation' and *tajalli* or 'self-disclosure' to explain the relationship of the world to God. Through the cosmos, God discloses Himself to His creatures. The creatures themselves are God's self-manifestation.

The fact that the Reality of God which is disclosed through the cosmos can be described by opposite and conflicting attributes explains, in the Muslim view, why the cosmos itself can be seen as a vast collection of opposites. The two hands of God are busy shaping all that exists. Hence, mercy and wrath, severity and gentleness, life-giving and slaying, exalt-

ing and abasing, and all the contradictory attributes of God are displayed in existence. These opposing pairs of names act together in a manner analogous to *yin* and *yang*. One way in which we perceive this constant interaction of the names is through change (*haraka*) and transmutation (*estehāla*). Here Chuang Tzu could say: "The existence of things is like a galloping horse. With every motion existence changes, at every second it is transformed" (Chuang Tzu 17. 6). For their part, the Ash'arite theologians said that nothing stands still in creation and no phenomenon remains constant in its place for two successive moments. Everything is in constant need of divine replenishment, since nothing exists on its own. Things can exist only if God gives them existence. If God were to stop giving existence to the universe for an instant, it would disappear. Hence, at each moment God re-creates the cosmos to prevent its annihilation.

The concept of the continual re-creation of the cosmos became a mainstay of Islamic cosmological thinking. Many authorities interpreted this constant change and transmutation in terms of the interplay of the diverse divine names. Thus, at each instant, the divine mercy and gentleness create all the things of the universe. In other words, at each instant God reaffirms His immanence and presence in the cosmos. But God is also transcendent and incomparable. Hence, just as His mercy creates, His wrath destroys. His unique and absolute reality cannot allow any other reality to exist along with it. At each instant, the divine gentleness brings the world into existence, and at each instant the divine severity destroys it. Every succeeding moment represents a new universe, similar to the preceding universe, but also different from it. Each new universe represents a new self-disclosure of God. According to the cosmological axiom, 'God's self-disclosure never repeats itself', since God is infinite.

The cosmos is a constantly shifting and changing pattern of relationships established by the archetypes of all existence, which are the names of God. Since the universe is created through the activity of the paired divine attributes, duality can be perceived at every level. Everywhere *yin* and *yang* are working together, producing transmutation and constant change. The Koran quotes God as saying, "And of everything We created pairs" (51:40). Or again, "God Himself created the pairs, male and female" (53:49). All things in the universe are paired with other things. Several of the pairs mentioned in the Koran take on special importance as the fundamental principles of creation. These include the Pen and the Tablet, which are specifically Islamic symbols, and heaven and earth, which find deep parallels in the Chinese tradition and elsewhere.

The Pen and the Tablet are mentioned in a few Koranic verses and some sayings of the Prophet. Referring to itself, the Koran says, "Nay, but it is a glorious Koran, on a guarded tablet" (85:22). The commentators explain this tablet as an invisible spiritual reality on which the Koran, the eternal and uncreated word of God, is written. The Koran refers to the Pen in the first verses which were revealed to the Prophet: "Read out! And thy Lord is the most generous, Who taught by the Pen, taught man what he knew not" (96:1-5). In another verse, God swears by the Pen: "By the Pen and what they inscribe" (68:1). These short and rather enigmatic verses provided a great deal of food for meditation, especially since the Prophet himself added a certain amount of interesting clarification. For example, he said:

The first thing God created was the Pen. Then He created the Tablet. He said to the Pen, "Write!" The Pen said, "What should I write?" God said to it, "Write whatever I dictate to you!" So, the Pen inscribed in the Tablet everything that God dictated to it, and that was His knowledge of the

creation, He would create until the Day of Resurrection.

Here the Prophet has told us that God's first creation was the Pen. He also said that the first thing God created was the intellect. Hence, he identified the cosmic Pen with what the cosmologists call the 'First Intellect'. All creatures are latent and undifferentiated in the Intellect's knowledge, just as ink is present inside the Pen. Then, by means of the Intellect, God creates the whole universe.

It should be clear that the term 'Pen' alludes to the *yang* side of the first spiritual creation, while the term 'Intellect' alludes to the *yin* side of this same reality. The Muslim cosmologists, like the Chinese, never saw anything as exclusively *yang* or exclusively *yin*. Each thing in the cosmos has both *yin* and *yang* dimensions to it. These can be brought out by investigating the various relationships which each thing establishes with other things. Thus, for example, the First Intellect is called by the name 'Intellect' at least partly because it has a receptive and feminine side to its nature. It has a face turned toward God through which it contemplates God and takes constant replenishment from His light. In contrast, this same reality is called a 'Pen' because of the active and masculine side to its nature. It has a face turned toward the universe, which it brings into existence by the act of writing upon the Tablet.

Without the Tablet, no duality could appear within spiritual existence, and without duality, there could be no physical universe, which depends upon multiplicity. Just as the Pen is called the 'First Intellect', so also the Tablet is called the 'Universal Soul'. In relationship to God, the First Intellect is receptive, dark and *yin*, but in relationship to the Universal Soul it is active, luminous, and *yang*. This principle has important repercussions in psychology, where spirit and soul in the human being correspond to the First Intellect and the Universal Soul in the cosmos.

Ebno'l-'Arabi describes all the realities in the cosmos as manifestations of different divine names. He finds the archetype of the Pen and Tablet in the Koranic verse, "God governs the affair and He differentiates the signs" (13:3). The Pen manifests the divine name, 'He who governs', while the Tablet manifests the name, 'He who differentiates'. On a lower level of existence, the spirit manifests the name, 'He who governs', in relation to the body. The spirit, which is the principle of life and awareness, governs, controls and directs the body in the same way that the Pen governs, controls and directs the Tablet.

Without the Tablet, the Pen could not write. The Tablet takes what is undifferentiated in the Pen and manifests all of its details. It allows for the articulation of all the existential words of God at a spiritual level of existence. This symbolism of the divine creative words is central to Islamic cosmological thinking, no doubt because a large number of Koranic verses allude to it. One of the most often cited support for the idea that all things are words of God is the verse, "God's only word, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be!', and it is" (16:40). Hence, say the cosmologists, each creature is a unique expression of the divine word, 'Be'. The Pen writes out these divine words on the Tablet, thus manifesting the spiritual essences of all things. The spirit of each and every thing in the cosmos is brought into existence as a unique word on the Tablet. Both Pen and Tablet, *yang* and *yin*, creative and receptive, are necessary for the spiritual realities of all things to come into actuality.

The Pen has two faces. With one face it looks at God, and with the other it looks at the Tablet and everything below it. In the same way, the Tablet also has two faces. With one face it looks at the Pen, and with the other it looks at the worlds which lie below it. In relation to the Pen, the Tablet is receptive and thereby manifests differentiation. But

in relation to the cosmos, the Tablet is active and manifests governing control. It becomes a *yang* reality. More specifically, says Ebno'l-'Arabi, it manifests both creativity and receptivity, both governing and differentiating. Hence, when the Tablet is discussed by its name 'Universal Soul', it is said to have two faculties: the faculty of knowing, through which it receives from the Intellect, and the faculty of acting or doing, through which it exercises control. The Universal Soul knows the details of the existence of all things, since these are differentiated within it. Since it knows these details, it governs the destiny of all things, for nothing escapes its knowledge. It acts by bestowing existence upon what it knows.

Pen and Tablet illustrate the workings of *yang* and *yin* within the spiritual or invisible world. On a lower level of existence, the spiritual world interacts with the visible world. This is frequently described in terms of 'heaven and earth', a pair of terms constantly employed in the Koran. The cosmologist Nasafi explains that the term 'heaven' refers to everything which stands above something else, while the term 'earth' refers to everything which stands below something else. Thus, the terms are relative and depend upon our point of view. That which is called 'earth' with respect to one thing may be called heaven with respect to another, just as a single reality may be *yang* in relation to one thing and *yin* in relation to another.

Heaven acts through effusing light and existence, while earth receives through accepting these. However, the station of the earth has a certain priority over that of the heavens. This is not to suggest that one of them comes into existence first, since there is always a heaven and an earth, that is, an aboveness and a belowness in created things. It simply means that the sufficient reason for the existence of heaven is to bestow upon the earth.

Without an earth, heaven is meaningless. You cannot have an

above without a below – nor, of course, can you have a below without an above. If the earth is not there to receive effusion, heaven is useless. Like the ground which receives the rain, the existence of the earth is a precondition for the manifestation of qualities which are concealed in heaven. The heavenly realities are formless or spiritual, and the earth gives them bodily forms. A spirit can do nothing until it gains control over a body which acts as its vehicle and instrument. Just as God created the universe to manifest His own perfections, the Hidden Treasure, so also the spirit needs the body to display its perfections. As Rumi (1925-40, p. 29, cf. Chittick, 1983, p. 29) puts it, *The spirit cannot function without the body,*

*and without the spirit, the body is empty and cold.*

*Your body is manifest and your spirit hidden:*

*These two put all the world's business in order.*

Nasafi goes on to divide all things into three kinds: Giver of effusion, receiver of effusion and product of the interrelationship between the two. 'Heaven' is that which is above something else and gives effusion to it. It may be a spiritual or a corporeal reality. 'Earth' is that which is below something else and receives effusion from it. It may belong to either the spiritual or the corporeal world. The creatures are the children of heaven and earth, the product of their interrelationship (Nasafi 1344 A. H./ 1965, pp. 224-25). Rumi (1925-40, III 4404, cf. Chittick, 1983, p. 163) expresses this idea in the verse:

*In the view of intellect, heaven is the man*

*and earth the woman.*

*Whatever the one throws down, the other nurtures.*

In this context Confucius sounds like just another Muslim cosmologist: "Heaven is lofty and earth is low. The creative directs the great beginning, and the receptive completes all

things" (Ta Chuan 1).

Examples of conceptual pairs in Muslim thinking could be multiplied indefinitely. Najmo'd-Din Rāzi sums up the general picture as follows:

"The seventy thousand worlds are all included in two all-embracing realms. These may be called light and darkness, kingship and kingdom, the unseen and the visible, the spiritual and the corporeal, the next world and this world. All these pairs are the same. Only the names differ" (Rāzi 1982, p. 304).

Instead of continuing with examples, however, I will try to put all this together by pointing to the Islamic conception of a human being. The whole purpose of cosmological thinking in Islam is to explain how human beings are the mediating reality in existence, the point at which everything comes together. Only through human beings can perfect harmony and equilibrium be established between God and the cosmos – that is, if they are successful in living according to the *Tao*. Chuang Tzu expresses the ultimate goal of Islamic cosmology with his words, "Heaven and earth and I live together – all things and I are one" (Chuang Tzu 2.6).

To review what has already been said, the one God is looked upon from two points of view, transcendence and immanence. With respect to God's transcendence and distance, human beings and all other creatures are God's absolute servants who must submit to His will. But with respect to God's immanence and nearness, human beings have another role to play. They were chosen out of all creatures to be God's vicegerents upon the face of the earth. That is why they were created in the divine image and with God's two hands. They possess all the divine attributes and can, therefore, act as God's representatives.

In gaining correct knowledge of God, one needs to combine the declaration of God's transcendence with the understanding of His imma-

nence. In the same way, Islamic anthropology sees a perfect human being as one who combines servanthood with vicegerency. In respect of God's transcendence, man is God's servant, but in respect of His immanence, man is His representative and vicegerent.

How we understand God and how we understand self depend on the point of view. Neither God nor a human being has two essences. God is one, and man is one. But man is like a two-sided mirror, one side of which reflects the qualities of servanthood as manifested in all of creation, and the other side of which reflects the qualities of Lordship as possessed by God. Man is both Lord and servant, and the human task is to keep these two sides of his reality in proper balance. As the image of God, man reflects Lordship and is greater than all other creatures. But since man manifests God, he also manifests the whole of creation, combining in himself the servanthood of all things. Hence, he is less than all creatures, since he is the servant of all God's names and attributes, while other creatures serve only some of His names and attributes, since they are incomplete images of God. As lord of all creation, man is the supreme *yang* reality, and as servant of all creation, he is the supreme *yin* reality. As Ebno'l-'Arabi puts it, "A human being is two transcriptions: an outward transcription and an inward transcription. The outward transcription corresponds to the macrocosm in its totality, while the inward transcription corresponds to God" (Ebno'l-'Arabi 1919, p. 21). The outward dimension of the human being is related to servanthood, the inward dimension to lordship and vicegerency. The outward dimension reflects man's distance from God and God's transcendence, while the inward dimension reflects man's nearness and God's immanence. The two dimensions, thus, reflect the two hands of God by which man was created.

In the Islamic view of things, all

creation comes into existence through the marriage of the complementary divine names, the names of Beauty and of Majesty, or the names of *yin* and of *yang*. Duality at the divine level results in the dual structure of humans, spiritual and corporeal, or formless and formal. The form or body is the receptacle of the formless or spirit, and both together are the locus of manifestation for the divine nature. In other words, the original nature of human beings is a copy of the divine nature. Spiritual perfection is to realize one's primordial and original nature, the divine nature latent in oneself.

This whole discussion cannot be epitomized better than by the words of the I Ching: "One *yin* and one *yang*. This is *Tao*. To inherit from the *Tao* is good. To actualize the *Tao* is the primordial human nature" (Ta Chuan 5).

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